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OUR OLD POETS AND THE TINKERS.<sup>1</sup>

IN this fresh breezy springtime that is upon us now, who of us has not joyed to lark with Autolycus under the budding hedgerows and by the lane side? Who has not, when the peddler and the umbrella-mender set forth on dusty roads once more, and the whirr of the scissors-grinder's wheel is heard in the streets, felt a something in him that makes him, too, wish to leave his office or study in the town, to wander out, aimless but hopeful, into the country? Then there sound in our ears words that challenge us:—

When daffodils begin to peer,  
With heigh! the doxy over the dale,  
Why, then comes in the sweet o' the year;  
For the red blood reigns in the winter's pale.

The white sheet bleaching on the hedge,  
With heigh! the sweet birds, O, how they sing!  
Doth set my pugging tooth on edge;  
For a quart of ale is a dish for a king.

The lark, that tirra-lirra chants,  
With heigh! with heigh! the thrush and the jay;  
Are summer songs for me and my aunts,  
While we lie tumbling in the hay.

Let us for a moment, while the fancy is on us, take up the "Winter's Tale," again, to inquire out the character of him who sings these lines. Autolycus first appears at the beginning of the second scene of the fourth act, you will remember, singing that ballad. He comes a peddler and a traveller with a pack on his back, but he is a rogue and a change-coat at heart; he has a dozen different trades to ply, all shady enough; he is no honest merchant, our Autolycus. In act. iv. scene 2 he counterfeits a man who has been robbed and beaten. Then he picks the pockets of the rustic Good Samaritan who comes to his aid. In act iv. sc. 3 he comes to the village merrymaking as a peddler, selling

Lawn, as white as driven snow;  
Cyprus, black as e'er was crow;  
Gloves, as sweet as damask roses;  
Masks for faces and for noses;  
Bugle-bracelet, necklace amber,  
Perfume for a lady's chamber;  
Golden quoifs and stomachers,  
For my lads to give their dears:  
Pins and poking-sticks of steel,  
What maids lack from head to heel:

<sup>1</sup> A paper read before the *Ἀμφαδον* Society of Harvard University.

and he appeals to the company,

Come buy of me, come; come buy, come buy;  
Buy, lads, or else your lasses cry :  
Come buy.

Still later, in the same scene, we see him suborned by Florizel to change garments with him, and then, as though helping the prince's elopement with Perdita were not roguery enough, he prepares, on his own account, to betray the prince to the king, his father. Roguery is part of the cheat's business, together with peddling, picking pockets, and pinching linen off hedges. As he says when he first appears, "I have served Prince Florizel, and in my time wore three-ply : but now I am out of service.

But shall I go mourn for that, my dear ?  
The pale moon shines by night :  
And when I wander here and there,  
I then do most go right.

If tinkers may have leave to live,  
And bear the sow-skin budget,  
Then my account I well may give,  
And in the stocks avouch it."

That is to say, Autolycus says that he is as respectable as the tinkers are, which is not far from saying he is of the tinker race himself. So I think he was, for the traveller by the roadsides who steals linen, picks pockets, peddles trinkets, and lives beneath the hedgerows is a brother to the whole *gens viarum*, and to all the sturdy vagabonds of merry England.

Of merry England I say advisedly. For though the scene of the "Winter's Tale" is laid in Bohemia, it is that Bohemia which lies outside of all our doors, if we would only look into it. Autolycus is a characteristic man of the roads of England, or, for that matter, of America, to-day.

Have we not seen the like before? Who has not read of the "Beggars of Bethnal Green,"<sup>1</sup> who turned out to be a disguised son to the Earl of Leicester; of the beautiful beggar maid, whom "King Cophetua" would wed;<sup>2</sup> of the "Gaberlunzie man" under whose guise James V. of Scotland went incognito?<sup>3</sup> Then there is that delightfully Bohemian comedy of Beaumont and Fletcher, the "Beggars' Bush," the whole story of which consists in the concealment of some exiled nobles amongst a troop of cheats and beggars,

*Jarkman, or patrico, cranke, or clapperdudgeon,*  
*Frater, or abram man.*<sup>4</sup>

Why, all our old literature teems with them, from the old ballads

<sup>1</sup> Percy's *Reliques*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Beggars' Bush*, act ii. sc. 2.

and King Cophetua's beggar maid to Sir John Falstaff's "Minions of the Moon."

From a Gypsy in the morning  
Or a pair of squint eyes turning:

From a strolling tinker's sheet,  
Or a pair of carriers' feet;

Bless the sovereign,

says Ben Jonson.<sup>1</sup> There you have them,—Gypsies and tinkers classed together, tinkers and pickpockets classed together, "all rogues and from Egypt."

I do not believe any one can fail to be impressed with the part the vagabond fraternity play in our old literature. More cases from the poets might be collected if I had time. They will occur to most of us. I know of no cases quite similar in continental literature. There are mentions of Gypsies there, to be sure. How could so romantic, wild a people as the Gypsies keep out of romance? Highwaymen, thieves, too, get their dues from French and German writers. But, so far as I know, there is nowhere else such frequent and kindly reference to a vagabond class, who are not dangerous, violent lawbreakers at all, but petty rogues, peddlers, and tricksters, small thieves, altogether the amusing parasites of society, perhaps, but nothing more deadly.

From the prevalence of this vagabond class in our literature, then, it would appear that it must have really existed amongst us in fact. But who were these vagabonds? Mere anybodys, shall we say? If the vagabond classes were nothing but the usual offscourings of the honester folk, if they were just ruined men, lazy fellows, tramps, that is, who had slipped out of the steady orders of society, why are they so much more prominent in England than on the continent? Certainly it was as easy for men to go wrong in the rest of Europe as in England. Surely, laziness was not confined to the British Isles. Yet nowhere on the continent do we find the poets taking up and representing the life of the roads as did our own poets, from Shakespeare down. It seems to me that we must suppose either some great inducement to vagrancy in mediæval England, or else some one class of people, whose ancestry and tradition wedded them to a wandering life.

As to a special inducement to vagrancy there is only one that I can think of. On the continent the law was *Nul homme sans seigneur*. Feudal institutions there held stricter sway than with our ancestors. The peasant was needed to serve his lord's tyranny at home, and sturdy vagrants were branded in the hand by the

<sup>1</sup> Ben Jonson, masque of *The Gypsies Metamorphosed*, *fin*.

king's justice, and whipped at the tail of a cart back to their own seignory. In England it may have been easier for vagrants to walk abroad. Yet, on the one hand, there was less inducement in England for men to turn tramps, for fifteenth and sixteenth century England was far and away more prosperous than the continental countries at the same date. Moreover, there were many laws against vagrancy passed by our ancestors. Especially do I note an act of Edward VI., entitled "An acte for tynckers and pedlers." Notice how that title is exactly framed to hit Shakespeare's Autolycus.

"For as muche as it is evident that tynkers, pedlers and suche like vagrant persons are more hurtfull than necessarie to the Common Wealth of this realm, Be it therefore ordeyned . . . that . . . no person or persons commonly called pedler, tynker or pety chapman shall wander or go from one towne to another or from place to place out of the towne, parishe, or village where such person shall dwell, and sell pynnes, poyntes, laces, gloves, knyves, glasses, tapes, or any suche kynde of wares whatsoever, or gather connye skynnes or suche like thing or use or exercise the trade or occupation of a tynker," except those that shall have a license from two justices of the peace.<sup>1</sup>

Because this vagabond tinker folk is so much more prominent in England and in English literature than on the continent, and because there appears no very good reason in the state of fifteenth and sixteenth century England why they should have been so, there must have been a distinct caste of travellers in England dating from centuries before, who kept to the roads because their inherited traditions were of the roads; who lived the life of the commons and hedgerows because they knew no other life, and who were the models of those sweet, amusing vagrants whom Beaumont and Fletcher, Ben Jonson and Shakespeare have portrayed. Of course, however, all that this argument seeks to prove is that such a caste or tribe existed as the nucleus of a vagrant population. Their numbers must have been continually swelled by broken-down respectability and decency, even as now.

What people could they have been? I know you expect me to say the Gypsies. Well, let me say right here that, although the Gypsies have most certainly left their impression on our literature and on our slang and on the types of our vagrancy, this old English vagrant stock could *not* have been the Gypsies.

The Gypsies came into England first in 1512, during the reign of Henry VIII. That means, of course, that, when Beaumont and Fletcher and Ben Jonson wrote, they had not been in England more

<sup>1</sup> *English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages*, by J. J. Jusserand; transl. by L. T. Smith, p. 232.

than a century at the most. Still, that was doubtless long enough for them to have made their impression. We find Ben Jonson writing a masque of the "Gypsies Metamorphosed," and they are often referred to in literature under their proper name. While, however, I admit this, I believe that a century was not time enough for Gypsy influence to have permeated the lower orders of the population and to have organized a class of vagrants who were not of distinctly Gypsy characteristics, except that, Gypsy-like, they lived on the roads.

For it was not in the manner of our Gypsies to-day that the Gypsies first appeared in England. The Anglo-American Romany has been acclimatized by four centuries of Englishry. He still tents on the commons, wanders the road nomad-wise, trades horses, while his wife tells fortunes and sells baskets. So no doubt Gypsies always did. But the Gypsy to-day is thoroughly anglicized. He is more at home in English than in his own Romany tongue, only the shreds and tatters of which he preserves; yes, he speaks English with a cockney accent. He is a boxer and prizefighter, a frequenter of county fairs and country taverns, thoroughly though quaintly of us. Not so his progenitors who came into England in the reign of Bluff King Hal. The Gypsies then had only been in Europe for a hundred years. They still were, in one sense, fresh from their oriental home. Their passage across Europe had been hurried; we hear of them first in Hungary in 1423 and they are in England by 1506.<sup>1</sup> In that short interval they had not had time to rub off their outlandishness. They must have been a wild, dirty, dark-skinned horde, like the troops of *Rômā* who come to America, sometimes, to-day, from the east of Europe. Of course they did not understand English, therefore the bar of a strange speech existed between them and our lower classes. We may, then, admit that the Gypsies were in England in the sixteenth century, that they were noticeable enough to be referred to in our literature, and that they were even then, no doubt, beginning to be assimilated to our vagrants and our lower classes. We have a right, however, to hold that they were as yet too foreign and outlandish to be a moulding force in the community, that they cannot be supposed to have formed that core of a vagabond class which we are looking for, especially as that class, as we find it, is not described with marked Gypsy traits.

For though it is on their first arrival, while they are still unsophisticated, that we should expect Gypsies to be most gypsified, the vagrants of our literature are not gypsified at all. Take Autolycus, who is, as it were, the text of our discussion — does he trade horses or have anything to do with horses? No, certainly not; and yet

<sup>1</sup> Borrow, *Zincali*, Introduction, p. 10.

all Gypsies have been of the horse, horsey, from time that the memory of man runneth not to the contrary. Does he bury the dead, or dress corpses, or is he any kind of a smith, or does he anywise suggest fortune-telling or basket-making? Not at all; yet these are the palladia of Gypsydom, wherein the people of the black blood were more confirmed when first they entered Europe than even now. On the contrary, Autolycus is peddler, rogue, and traveller, and calls himself a *tinker*.

It is evident that our problem is developing. Literary and historical considerations lead us to expect a race of hereditary vagrants in the England of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but the Gypsies will not serve our purpose. Who will? Let me leave the discussion a little while and tell of some of my personal observations.

I was strolling through the fields, one day, north of Poughkeepsie, N. Y., and came up a hill near the edge of a country lane. The ground sloped down from the lane opposite me to a brook that runs through a dell below the road into the fields. There, between the lane and the brook, the little dell is uninclosed, the lots lie to common, and by the brookside near the road, under old elm-trees fenced in by bramble bushes, the Gypsies wone to camp. Even as I came across the fields this summer afternoon I could see a big dark tent pitched below the road, two smartly painted wagons like Gypsy vans, and horses pasturing.

"*Roms in the tan!*" I said, well pleased, and hurried down, across the brook, to see them.

There was just one young man in the camp, for, as usual with the travelling folk, most of the company were about their business in the town. He sat whittling a tent-pole in front of the big dingy tent, and I hastened up to salute him.

"*Sârishân pâl*," I cried, "*pûcher mändi âv adrê o tăn!*" which is Gypsy for "Brother, hullo! ask me into your tent."

"I don't understand you, sorr," he replied with a very marked Irish accent; "is it Romanes ye's are talking?"

"Why, yes, to be sure; aren't you Romanys?" I asked in surprise.

"No, we're Irish: always been Irish," said he.

"But you talk Gypsy?" I asked.

"Not much," he chuckled, "but I can understand a little; now what would you call a horse and a mare?"

"A *grâi* and a *gräsni*," said I.

"And a field?" he continued.

"*Pûw*," I answered.

"*Chiv the grâis in the pûw*" (turn the horses into the field), he exclaimed with triumph.

"*Tē mūk lendi lel chor*,"<sup>1</sup> I continued complacently.

After that evidence of depth on my part we were great friends, which state of things was much strengthened when he found I knew a little old Irish — however little.

He told me his name was Lackey Costello. He and his foster father, mother, and aunt were travelling the roads with van, tent, and horses, Gypsy fashion. They sold oilcloth and peddled knick-knacks; the men did a little swapping horses, but the women neither sold baskets nor told fortunes, and the men were also — *tinkers*.

Irish tinkers! An idea at once came over me. What says Prince Hal in Eastcheap? "I am so good a proficient in one quarter of an hour that I can drink with any tinker in his own language during my life."<sup>2</sup>

Then I bethought me that the veteran Romany Rye, Charles G. Leland, in the last essay in his little book, "*The Gypsies*,"<sup>3</sup> claims to have discovered what this proper language of the tinkers is. He, too, found Irish tinkers, like these I had found, who camped on the road like Gypsies, only not quite like them, who knew some Romany, some old Irish, but kept to themselves a dialect for their own which was neither of these. Leland calls it *Shelta* and pronounces it Celtic, which it certainly is. He says it is very rare, a dialect he has found only three men altogether who knew.

"Perhaps, though," I thought, "these men know it. I'll try it on at any rate, and find how it takes;" so, turning to Lackey Costello there at the tent door, I asked, "Can you *thá'rī, sū'blī*?" (Can you talk tinkers' cant, friend?)

Lackey looked puzzled. "Why, yes," said he, "I can *thá'rī*, but how did you learn it?"

"I don't know it," said I. "I want to learn it: will you teach me?"

"Why, yes," said Lackey, much pleased, "but I'm d—d if I see how you knew there was such a language."

I stayed about the Costellos' camp, off and on, for two days. They taught me words of the *thá'rī*, as they call their language, and told me a good deal about themselves. The vocabulary they gave me I append to this paper.

Now, it seems that this language is not so rare as Mr. Leland thought, but is spoken by numerous tinkers and travellers all over the English-speaking world. Since my first interview with the Costellos I have met travellers who spoke the *thá'rī* in New York city, in Danbury, Conn., in Cambridge and Boston, Mass., and up and down through my own Hudson River country. I believe that,

<sup>1</sup> Let them take pasture.

<sup>2</sup> *Henry IV.* Pt. I. act ii. sc. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Leland, *Gypsies*, pp. 354-372.



far from being rare, there must be some hundreds of people in the eastern United States who speak it. For one locality, there is quite a colony of these tinkers in New York city, between First and Third avenues, near 102d Street and 110th Street. There some of them can generally be found, and there very many of them winter. But when the spring comes,

When dafodils begin to peer,

they take to the roads again, driving and tenting down through the country, selling oilcloth, swapping horses, and tinkering. *Minkiers* they call themselves; *Thd'rī* they call their language. They also call it the *sūnī* language, which means the "look here" language, just as the Gypsy half-breeds are called the *didakai* (for *dik akāi*), or "look-here" people. This is a name I have never understood. My tinkers did not know the word Leland uses for their language, — *Shelta*. In our part of the country the tinker families that travel east of the Alleghanies are chiefly the Costellos, Burkes, McDonnells, Rileys, Dohertys, Kerigans, and Furys. The Sherlocks and Carrols and some of the Costellos travel in the South. The Gordons, Haydens, and Rileys travel in Ohio.

These people are Roman Catholics; they consider fortune-telling wicked, but I think, on the whole, they pay very little attention to the rites of the Church. They do not speak well of the Gypsies, and the Gypsies do not like them, but their habits of life often throw them together on the roads; they manage to get on together without much fighting, and I have even been told that in some rare cases they intermarry with Gypsies, though I doubt if this is true. They almost all of them know more or less Romany and old Irish beside their own *thd'rī*. The English name by which they call themselves is the "Travellers."

So much for my observations. But these Irish tinkers have been observed lately by a number of folk-lorists in the old country, and it is found that they are quite numerous in England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Their dialect, which they keep very secret, varies more or less in different parts of the British Islands. I may say that my tinkers, though born in Ireland, had, they told me, passed much of their time in Wales before coming to America. The words they gave me differed in many cases from those given by Mr. Leland, and in the articles contained in the "Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society," to which I beg leave to refer.<sup>1</sup> In the second volume of that journal, Mr. John Sampson has discussed these vagrants as they appear, particularly in England and Scotland.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, vol. i. p. 253; vol. ii. pp. 121, 127, 204, 257, 319, 321; vol. iii. pp. 23, 195, 247.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Sampson's article, vol. ii. p. 204; Mr. Leland's, vol. ii. p. 321; and Mr. MacRitchie's, vol. i. p. 350.

The tinkers in Ireland are a distinct caste, who have lived by themselves for generations. They speak what they call cant, but what, on learned investigation, proves to be some dialect of *thá'rí*. I might note that Irish and Scotch tinkers and Gypsies whom I have met have used the word "cant" for both tinkers' *thá'rí* and the Romany of the Gypsies. The Irish tinkers, moreover, have certain customs of their own, particularly that of wife-swapping; generally they appear like a caste which has, from time immemorial, been distinct from the people among whom they have lived.

Such are tinkers all over the British Isles and America. They are an ancient race, a nomad caste, who, although unlike the Gypsies, they are probably of the same race with the people among whom they wander, have, nevertheless, kept to themselves and the roads for centuries past. They marry only among themselves; associate fraternally only with their own clan; hand down their wandering profession, their tinkering, peddling trade, and especially their mysterious Celtic dialect, from father to son, from generation to generation. So they have done doubtless for centuries past; no new-born stock could have invented their ancient language; and it is certain that this merry race of vagrants formed the core of a tramping, vagabond population in England before the sixteenth century, before ever the Romany Gypsies landed on our shores.

Well, all this is just what we were looking for. Just such a merry race of hereditary vagrants the mention of them in our older literature led us to suppose existed. I believe we have found them.

As a further proof, moreover, of my thesis, consider how often, in our literature, vagrants are alluded to by this very word by which the people I describe are still called, — "tinker." Tinkers were my friends in Gypsy Hollow, near Poughkeepsie, N. Y. Well, tinkers are the vagrants sung in Jonson, the ballads, and Shakespeare. So, to return to the text of our essay, our friend Autolycus calls himself a tinker: —

If tinkers may have leave to live,  
And bear the sow-skin budget;<sup>1</sup>  
Then my account I well may give,  
And in the stocks avouch it.

I believe that it is this wandering tinker caste, vagabonds by

<sup>1</sup> This word *budget* is still the technical word in Ireland for the box containing materials used by a tinsman. It is also interesting to note that "most of the country people in Ireland profess to believe that the only necessary marriage ceremony needed by the tinkers generally is for the man and woman to jump together, hand in hand, over the 'budget.'" — Mr. MacRitchie in *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, vol. i. p. 351.

heredity and with a language of their own, who formed the great mass of English vagrants in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. They were an old race then. They it was whom our poets have commemorated.

How ancient these tinkers are it is hard to say, but MacRitchie and Leland have suggested for them an antiquity venerable indeed. It is well known that among the Celtic nations of ancient Europe the bronze-smiths formed more or less of a hereditary caste.<sup>1</sup> They are called *caird* or *ceard*. Travellers, of course, they were, for they wandered across the north, making their art-works wherever there was demand for them. All those beautiful rings and armlets, daggers and leaf-shaped swords, nowadays unearthed, were their make; and their involved patterns, spirals, and twists, their careful, often elegant work, shows them to have been masterly and cunning craftsmen.

Well, it has been suggested that these tinkers and tinsmiths are the old bronze-smiths' degenerate survivors to this day; that the Sasennach conquest, that has broken up the old Celtic world, has reduced the smith of the north to this low estate. Who knows?

# VOCABULARY OF MINKIERS THARI.

(TINKERS' OR TRAVELLERS' CANT.)

*Collected in Poughkeepsie, N. Y.*

sū'bli=boy.	ko'riben=fighting. — This is a Gypsy word.
mī'nkier=tinker (or traveller).	Git your thá'rīn=stop your talking.
thá'rī=to talk.	ishka=water. — One tinker said this was Irish.
grā'ni=to know.	krūk mor. The Costellos did not know whether this meant a river or a big hill. <i>Mor</i> is Irish, they said, and means big.
kū'ri=horse.	wā'gīn=wagon. — An old tinker says this is not cant but Irish.
chí'ni=fire. — Note: An old tinker says this is Irish, not cant.	mésli=to go.
thédi=fire, — the proper word, the old tinker said.	slim your jīl=to beat you.
kā'mpa=camp or tent, like the Gypsy <i>tān</i> .	múgels=apples.
kāmpān klúgen e mukya=camp of the pig's head. — Said to be a famous camp in Wales.	shlān=beer.
gyuch } or } gyürch } = a man.	skai'hōp=whiskey.
fē'ke de gyürch !=look at the man.	ālamuk=milk.
lākīn } or } = girl.	kā'mbre=dog.
lārkin }	I 'm mésliēn to sū'nī nī nī'dhe menthroḡ = I 'm going to see my friend.
byür=a woman.	thá'nyok=half-penny; one cent.
pī=mouth.	mush=umbrella.
	mush-fakir=umbrella mender.

<sup>1</sup> *Jour. of Gypsy Lore Society*, vol. i. p. 355.

These two words, they said, are  
slang of the roads, not *thâ'ri*.

grü'thī=a hat.

risbaith

or } = a basket.

rásbedh }

chi'mi=stick.

chi'mi láshuwul=a nice stick.

chi'mi mü'nī=a good stick.

láshuwul=nice.

mü'nī=good.

Lóbrame dhīē'l=I'll hit you.

â'di nyūk=on the head.

nyūk=head.

mâ'lyl=hand.

chē'rpīn

or } = finger.

chē'pīn }

koreb=to kill. — Leland gives *curb*.

Cf. Gypsy kūr.

smâ'ragh=nose.

lū'rkī=eye.

nâ'dhrum=mother.

gâ'thera=father.

gâ'hedi=child.

bīni=small.

thōm=big.

nyūk=one.

ōn nyūk=two. }

Old Hugh Costello gave me these  
numerals, but his boys laughed at

them: "No tinker would know  
them."

mídyok=shilling; twenty-five cents.

amiīlth=I.

królushk=hungry.

dhá'dē=bread.

aidh=butter.

lóskum=salt.

skai=water.

rū'mōgh=egg.

rū'moghe=eggs.

gloch=man.

Lō'be dhī'l ā're pī (or bi)=hit him on  
the mouth!

Nâ'dhrum, kerá' thū mi gâ'thera?=

Mother, where did you leave my  
father?

Tha królushk ami'lth=I am hungry.

Lūsh thū dīcher=did you dine?

stī'ma=pipe.

mū'nchias=tobacco.

fē'he=meat.

grēer=hay.

gâ'redh=money.

yäck=watch. — This word is probably  
"slang of the roads."

{ pī'pa=pipe.

{ sī'sor=scissors.

{ graúmach hrī hū="I'm very fond of  
you in my heart!" — These three last  
are probably old Irish, Costello says.

#### VALUES OF LETTERS USED ABOVE.

â=a in all.

ā=a in father.

ä=a in sand.

a=a in pelican.

ē=a in fate.

ī=ee in sweet.

ō=o in hole.

ū=oo in boot.

ŭ=u in put.

u=in mutter.

ai=i in fight.

y=y in young.

j=j in jump.

h=Greek χ.

dh=a very guttural d.

*Frederick S. Arnold.*